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The urbanisation of the Iranian Plateau and adjacent areas during the Bronze Age: Concluding thoughts

Jan-Waalke Meyer, Emmanuelle Vila, Régis Vallet, Marjan Mashkour

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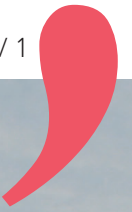
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THE IRANIAN PLATEAU DURING THE BRONZE AGE DEVELOPMENT OF URBANISATION, PRODUCTION AND TRADE

*edited by Jan-Waalke Meyer, Emmanuelle Vila, Marjan Mashkour,
Michèle Casanova and Régis Vallet*



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The book compiles a portion of the contributions presented during the symposium "Urbanisation, commerce, subsistence and production during the third millennium BC on the Iranian Plateau", which took place at the Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée in Lyon, the 29-30 of April, 2014. The twenty papers assembled provide an overview of the recent archaeological research on this region of the Middle East during the Bronze Age. The socio-economic transformation from rural villages to towns and nations has prompted many questions into this evolution of urbanisation. What was the impact of interactions between cultures in the Iranian Plateau and the surrounding regions (Mesopotamia, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Indus Valley)? What was the overall context during the Bronze Age on the Iranian Plateau? What was the extent and means of the expansion of the Kuro-Araxe culture? How did the Elamite Kingdom become established? What new knowledge has been contributed by the recent excavations and studies undertaken in the east of Iran? What was the influence of the Indus Valley culture, known as an epicentre of urbanisation in South Asia? What are the unique characteristics of the ancient cultures in Iran?

While the urbanisation of early Mesopotamia has been the subject of much debate for several decades, this topic has only recently been raised in respect to the Iranian Plateau. This volume is the product of an international community from Iranian, European, and American institutions, consisting of recognised specialists in the archaeology of the Iranian Bronze Age. It provides an overview of the latest research, including abundant results from current on-going excavations. The current state of archaeological research in Iran, comprising many dynamic questions and perspectives, is presented here in the form of original contributions on the first emergence of towns in the Near and Middle East.

L'ouvrage rassemble une partie des contributions présentées lors du colloque « Urbanisation, commerce, subsistance et production au III^e millénaire avant J.-C. sur le Plateau iranien » qui s'est tenu à la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée à Lyon les 29 et 30 avril 2014. Les vingt articles réunis livrent un état récent de la recherche archéologique dans cette région du Moyen-Orient pour l'âge du Bronze. Le développement socio-économique entre le mode de vie rural et la formation des villes et des états soulève de nombreuses interrogations sur le processus de l'urbanisation. Quel est l'impact des relations culturelles entre le Plateau iranien et les régions adjacentes (Mésopotamie, Sud-Caucase, Asie centrale, vallée de l'Indus) ? Quel est le contexte global de l'âge du Bronze sur le Plateau Iranien ? Comment s'opère l'expansion de la culture Kuro-Araxe à partir du Caucase ? Comment le royaume élamite se met en place ? Quel est l'apport des fouilles et travaux récents dans l'Est iranien ? Quelle est l'influence de la vallée de l'Indus, un centre d'urbanisation important en Asie ? Comment se manifestent les singularités du monde iranien ?

Alors que la thématique de l'urbanisation en Mésopotamie a été très débattue ces dernières décennies, cette question est abordée depuis peu pour le Plateau iranien. Le présent volume émane d'une communauté internationale d'archéologues d'institutions iraniennes, européennes et américaines, spécialistes reconnus de l'archéologie iranienne de l'âge du Bronze. Il dresse un panorama de l'état des recherches qui se nourrit amplement des travaux de terrain en cours. L'ouvrage rend compte de la dynamique actuelle de la recherche archéologique en Iran, riche de nouveaux questionnements et de nouvelles perspectives, et constitue un apport original à la réflexion sur l'émergence des villes au Moyen-Orient.



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THE IRANIAN PLATEAU DURING THE BRONZE AGE

DEVELOPMENT OF URBANISATION, PRODUCTION AND TRADE

*edited by Jan-Waalke Meyer, Emmanuelle Vila, Marjan Mashkour,
Michèle Casanova and Régis Vallet*

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The urbanisation of the Iranian Plateau and adjacent areas during the Bronze Age

Concluding thoughts

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The papers gathered in this volume aimed to address various questions highlighting problems related to the material culture in Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The environmental conditions in this part of the Asian continent, dominated by contrasting highlands and lowlands, general aridity and marked continentality, are very different to those in the Near East. These physical and climatic features, added to deep-rooted ethnic diversity, led to a different cultural development from that of the Near East. The domestication of plants and animals is the most important fundamental development in human societies and numerous studies over the past decade have shown the existence of more than one core region¹. A second fundamental development is undoubtedly the emergence of urbanisation, which initially occurred in the Near East. The aim of the conference organised in Lyon was to shift further to the East and to examine the development of urbanism outside Mesopotamia more closely, with a focus on the Iranian Plateau, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Based on our understanding of Near Eastern urbanisation, the contribution of this conference was to highlight the need to find another definition of the term “urbanisation”, or rather to talk about “Iranian urbanisation”. It also became clear that systematic surveys using methods provided by archaeology and the natural sciences, conducted with the aim of revealing dependencies between settlements and their environment, cannot possibly come up with as pertinent results for Iran as they can for Mesopotamia. One reason for this is certainly due to the substantial changes that the natural environment has undergone in Iran due to human influence. This topic is particularly well demonstrated in Elnaz Rashidian’s contribution, who proposes different parameters for a definition of “urban” and highlights the need for large-scale excavations, based on geomagnetic investigations when possible, for example for the urbanisation of Tal i-Malyan.

In fact, one of the widely-debated questions regarding the development of Iranian Bronze Age societies concerns exterior influences on north-western Iran and the Iranian Plateau, especially from the Kura-Araxes culture in the fourth to third millennium BC. Several papers in the first section

1. Conolly et al. 2011; Zeder and Hesse 2000; Reihl, Zeidi and Conard 2013; Brousahki et al. 2016.

focus on the development of this culture in Iran. G. Palumbi assesses the whole distribution area of the Kura-Araxes culture and its relation with the settlement of the Uruk period by comparing the cultural developments between the two most distant sites, characterized successively by Uruk and Kura-Araxes occupation phases – Godin Tepe in the Kangavar Valley and Arslantepe in the Upper Euphrates Valley (Turkey). In this way, he highlights the differences between both cultures and discusses the impact of the Uruk model on the societies and economies of the Iranian highlands, based on the hypothesis of a synergy between Uruk and northern Kura-Araxes communities in the fourth millennium BC. Palumbi assumes that features such as specialized animal breeding and sophisticated administration found their way into the Kura-Araxes culture through the influence of local groups. Sepideh Maziar debates the question of the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition in Iran, especially in the Araxes valley, based on the results of her excavations in Kohne Pasgah Tepesi, with the presence of interesting elements such as circular mud brick architecture in Phase III and the remains of a kiln and two chamber tombs with faunal and ceramic offerings in Kohne Tepesi. In another recent excavation in the Khoda-Afarin plain along the Araxes, she describes the change from the local Late Chalcolithic to the Kura-Araxes culture. It appears that several Late Chalcolithic sites were abandoned and only some of them were reoccupied. S. Maziar underlines the heterogeneity of the changes in all parts of north-western Iran and the fact that each area has its own trajectory. It seems as if the often-proposed nomadic mobility of the Kura-Araxes groups cannot be verified, as shown by the results of faunal and botanical analyses from the local context of Kohne Pasgah Tepesi and Kohne Tepesi (cf. the contribution of Decaix/Mohaseb Karimlu/Maziar/Mashkour/Tengberg),



Fig. 1 – Location of archaeological sites and principal regions in Iran and adjacent areas quoted in the text; Archaeological site in plain black, modern cities in italic, modern provinces in black italic capital letters, ancient civilisations in green, mountains in capital red, plains and deserts in plain red.

as well as from a more comprehensive study of material from Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran (cf. the contribution of Decaix/Berthon/Tengberg/Mohaseb Karimlu). These studies show that settlements were occupied all year round. According to the available faunal and botanical data, the agro-pastoral system of the settled Kura-Araxes groups is less homogenous than it appears at first sight. Further studies of the archaeobotanical and archaeozoological remains from the Azerbaijan province of Iran and the Kura-Araxes settlements would be helpful for getting a clearer image of the Early Bronze Age subsistence economy, agro-pastoral practices and environment. Some particular aspects require more detailed investigation, such as evidence of ploughing, the development of tree cultivation and the wild or cultivated, indigenous or introduced status of some fruit, such as the grape and the fig. The understanding of the Kura-Araxes pastoral system based on cattle, sheep and goat farming is also a challenge, in particular for the understanding of pastoral practices that could have involved some herd mobility. Recent ongoing research on mobility patterns using stable isotopes should provide new insights in the coming years.

Another section of the book deals with the development of Elam. Three articles treat the Proto-Elamite period (end of the fourth to the end of the third millennium BC) on the Susiana plain in the present-day province of Khuzestan in south-western Iran. These papers incorporate many data and highlight some of the problems related to the stratigraphic designations and chronological framework of Khuzestan. With regard to the pertinent levels at Susa Acropolis I (Le Brun) and at Tappeh Senjar, (Sardari/Attarpour), respectively, different designations were used for the levels (e.g. Le Brun, level 16, Sardari, level 16A-C) and periods (Le Brun, Susa III, Sardari Susa IIIA-C). Le Brun sees a cultural break – at least in the development of the pottery – between levels 14B and 14A, whereas Sardari includes both levels under Susa IIIB and assumes that the break occurs in Susa IIIA, and only affects level 13. A look at the chronological proposals of other authors renders the situation even more complicated: for the time span of Susa III (A-C), Le Breton uses “Susa Cb to Db”², Steve and Gasche “Jamdat Nasr and Early Dynastic”³, Dittmann “Proto-Elamite 1, Proto-Elamite 2 (a and b), Proto-Elamite 3”⁴, Carter, then Alden “Early, Middle, and Late Susa III”⁵. It would make sense to use a single system for the chronology. A. Zalaghi, in his contribution about the results of a survey to the west of the Karkheh River, does not encounter these difficulties since his material is not stratified and is only attributable to the Susa III period. Although many archaeological surveys have been conducted in the Susiana plain, most of them were carried out a long time ago. As the sherds have not been systematically published and some of the sites have now been completely destroyed by agricultural activities, there is little archaeological evidence left today from early third millennium BC settlements in Upper Khuzestan. A. Zalaghi observes that it is difficult to analyse the settlement systems in northern Susiana but notes that there is no evidence of hierarchical organization and long-term settlements during the Proto-Elamite period in the Susiana plain. Recent research in eastern Karun⁶ points to population movements during this period, possibly from the western to the eastern sector of the Susiana plain, raising the question of a shift to nomadism. The key point here is that all three contributions agree that the Proto-Elamite settlements in Khuzestan, including Susa, were not urban.

E. Rashidian has a somewhat different outlook regarding the development of urban centres in Iran. In keeping with the opinion of some scholars, she considers the Proto-Elamite settlements of Susa, Choga Mish and Abu Fanduweh to be urban – a development that we take to begin from the Old Elamite period, only. She notes that only two sites, Susa and Anshan (Tal i-Malyan), are called “cities” for the whole Elamite period and wonders where the other cities of Elam are and how many of them there

2. Le Breton 1957.

3. Steve and Gasche 1971.

4. Dittmann 1986.

5. Carter 1980; Alden 1987.

6. Moghaddam 2012.

were, emphasizing the fact that these questions remain unanswered. It is, however, as she underlines, important to grasp how dependent settlements were on the hydraulic system. In Iran, the situation is very different from that of Mesopotamia, as there are more small rivers and thus greater variability in the water supply. E. Rashidian stresses the difficulty of landscape reconstruction, especially in the Susiana plain, due to greater environmental changes linked to river shifts, successive transgressions of the Persian Gulf coastline and, more recently, agricultural and industrial developments. Moreover, the lack of marine archaeological investigations severely limits our understanding of the hydraulic systems. Her recommendation is the systematic use of geoarchaeological methods in archaeological research for a better understanding of the interaction between natural sediments and cultural deposits (toponym-hydronym interaction).

The third section deals with various aspects of urbanisation in eastern Iran. Tureng Tepe in the Gorgan plain in north-eastern Iran (Bessenay-Prolonge/Vallet) is of great interest as, along with Tepe Hissar, it is one of the two main excavated settlements from the Burnished Grey Ware culture (Bronze Age about 3800-1600 BC) and is considered to be proto-urban and then urban. For the High Terrace – remains of monumental architecture, considered to be an important urban feature – of Tureng Tepe, the authors point out some parallels with sites in Bactria (Mundigak, Nad-i-Ali, Altyn Depe). So far, only one publication concerning the later levels – Sassanian and Islamic – of this site exists, and the Early and Middle Bronze Age constructional relations behind the abovementioned comparisons, are under study. The High Terrace was probably composed of at least two platforms and it should not be interpreted as a ziggurat, but rather as a large monument with regional power, such as in the case of a palace. The same is probably true of the structures at comparable sites, although they do not reach the large size of the High Terrace of Tureng Tepe. New carbon dating evidence validates the Bronze Age dating of the Terrace to the second part of the third millennium BC.

In addition to a very detailed report of the first season of excavations at Tepe Chalow in the North Khorasan province, and the occupation sequence from the Late Chalcolithic to the Middle/Late Bronze Age on the site, the article by A. Vahdati/Biscione/La Farina/Mashkour/Tengberg/Fathi/Mohaseb discusses the origins of the GKC culture (Greater Khorasan Civilization). For a long time, this specific cultural complex was called the BMAC culture (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex), then the Oxus Civilisation. It was recently named the GKC culture after its probable area of origin and distribution thought to be in southern Turkmenistan and north-eastern Khorasan, according to recent research. The site contains abundant objects (ceramics, luxury goods) belonging to the GKC culture from the third and second millennia BC (2300-1700 BC). On the basis of the discovery of such a unique assemblage of GKC materials, this part of Khorasan appears to be the first permanent settlement area of the GKC culture in Iran. Further evidence comes from a large necropolis. No traces of GKC architecture have yet been found on the site. Archaeobotanical and archaeozoological analyses demonstrate intensive agricultural activities. There are also numerous indications of trade relations with the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia. Unlike the GKC expansion in the Kerman and Gorgan plain areas, considered to be the migration of elite groups from Bactria and Margiana, the occupation of Tepe Chalow seems to be due to a GKC population influx that replaces the local culture. Further investigations on other sites in the area of Tepe Chalow and radiocarbon dating will enhance our understanding of the spread of the GKC culture complex.

In his contribution on the development of southeast Iran, N. Eskandari tackles the topic of urbanisation directly. He proposes the following parameters: socio-economical stratification of society, work specialization, participation in long-distance trade, administrative activities. Against this background, he recognizes the settlements of Shahr-i-Sokhta, Jiroft and Shahdad as urban centres in the third millennium BC – although they differ with regard to a further parameter, namely the spatial organisation and exploitation of the natural environment. While satellite settlements spread around Shahr-i-Sokhta and Jiroft, there are only a few smaller settlements in the surroundings of Shahdad. In recent surveys, two other large, probably urban, settlements have been discovered; Keshit and Mokhtarabad. They are also located at the edge of the Lut desert and presumably controlled long-distance trade. Since these surveys did not reveal Chalcolithic or Bronze Age pastoral sites in

the mountainous part of the Dasht-e Lut area, N. Eskandari considers the role of pastoral societies to be minimal in the rise and development of the urbanisation of south-eastern Iran. D. Meier focuses on a feature of technological development in Shahdad by examining a certain kind of oven used for melting copper ore, discovered in the house at site D. Comparable installations are known in Turkmenistan (Monjukli Tepe – the earliest examples –, Gonur, Adjı Kui 9) and Susa; they are dated between the second half of the fifth and the second half of the second millennium BC. For some time now, there has been further evidence of far-reaching relationships between the Murghab delta, East Iran, Mesopotamia and the Indus valley from the third to the second millennia BC, namely for finished goods (metal objects, such as decorated cylindrical beakers and Bactrian axes; pottery vessels; stone objects, such as seated female figurines or “chlorite” artefacts, cf. H.P. Francfort’s article; seals, etc.), as well as raw materials. It is still unclear as to whether the distribution of this pyro-technological installation for melting copper means more than that the users were in contact with each other, namely that they share common roots.

The fourth section centres on questions of trade and subsistence production. These questions are best approached via archaeological and philological sources – Proto-Elamite, Elamite and Mesopotamian –, but also via archaeozoological and archaeobotanical investigations. The domestication of the donkey and the horse undoubtedly opened up new opportunities for long-distance trade, and the physical and chemical analyses of materials do not only inform us about the production of the respective objects but also about their provenance. This is a way of bringing to light regional, supra-regional and long-distance trade relations, which provide insights into relations between individual settlements and thereby also into the degree of urbanisation. Relations of this kind became obvious between the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. A clear distinction should be made between the movement of material objects, of ideas and notions, and of the migration of people.

M. Dabbagh addresses the social role of women in the domestic as well as in the urban sphere during the Elamite Kingdom on the basis of legal and administrative texts. She discusses the place of women in agricultural activities, in trade and in economic exchanges. According to various kinds of activities, such as weaving, baking, water carrying, milling, etc., women were obviously an essential part of the economic framework of society. H.-P. Francfort considers trade relations in his contribution about objects made of “black stone” (chlorite, steatite, serpentine, etc.). Besides a plausible iconographic analysis that ends with a stylistic differentiation of the production centres, he relates the items of the so-called “série récente” to the BMAC (Oxus Civilisation)/GKC culture and proposes a convincing trade route from Bactria (Oxus) through Khorasan via Central Iran to Mesopotamia. Against this background, his identification of the Marhashi in cuneiform texts from Bactria is also convincing (in contrast to Steinkeller)⁷ and is in agreement with the new findings in north Khorasan mentioned above. The so-called “série ancienne” (e.g. Jiroft) is presumed to be a production from the province of Kerman – although the same motifs are known in Bactria (in other materials). The motifs are impressively reduced to a “group of life”, a “group of death” and to the “lord of the animals”.

Four other contributions in this section are less concerned with questions of urbanism but rather with aspects of the material culture and the social conditions of the Elamite period. H. Pittman considers the dynamics of trade and exchange between Iran and Central Asia; she presents five seals from Gonur Tepe, all with motifs that are said to come from the province of Kerman. A reciprocal influence between Bactria (Oxus) and the province of Kerman (Halil Rud/Bampur Oases) during the last quarter of the third millennium BC is evident, and, as the author plausibly argues, not just between these two oases, but also with the Helmand Oasis (Shahr-i-Sokhta), the Indus Valley, as well as with Elam and Mesopotamia. The suggestion that the woman with the extensively described seal from tomb 1393 in Gonur Tepe was originally from Kerman and came to the Oxus region as a bride, is less well ascertained but is nonetheless plausible. The very impressive assemblages of objects from

7. Steinkeller 2014.

archaeological and looted sites recently identified in the Kerman province reveal the originality and specificity of local imagery in this region at the beginning of the third millennium. S. Piran provides a general overview of the motifs on the respective items from the province of Kerman and the National Museum in Teheran in order to assemble a catalogue that would help to attribute the objects from illegal excavations.

M. Casanova discusses the exchange sphere of lapis lazuli and the question of intermediate markets on trade routes between the different civilizations (Indus Valley, Central Asia, Mesopotamia and Egypt).

B. Rafiei Alavi looks at the origin and distribution of a certain type of dagger (crescent-shaped guard) existing in Middle and Late Elamite times – from the middle of the second millennium to the first millennium BC – in north-western Iran to the south of the Gulf. This dagger type first appears in the Khuzestan plain sites and expands during the Middle Elamite before becoming confined to northwest Iran. B. Rafiei Alavi discusses the possible function of the crescent guard, in relation to the manufacturing method and the change of function throughout time (functional role in the LBA, decorative unit in the IA I, back to a functional role in the IA II). He argues against a symbolic meaning (moon god), but favours a metaphorical sense (sharpness, ferocity).

A last section focuses on the transition to the Iron Age. Based on new archaeological analyses in Central Iran (provinces of Tehran, Qazvin, Qom, Esfahan...) and natural science investigations in north-western Iran (Hasanlu, Dinkha Tepe), H. Fahimi demonstrates that the distribution of Grey Ware from Central Iran towards the north must not be regarded as a marker of the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Grey Ware is already present in the north during the Late Bronze Age. Therefore, we should not interpret this as a rupture between these two periods, but rather as a cultural shift from a sedentary way of life (LBA) towards a more nomadic one (IA).

Epilogue: experimenting urbanisation phenomenon. The patchwork of the Iranian Plateau and its neighbours

To conclude, the overall picture of Iran's cultural landscapes – the northwest (Kura-Araxes), Khuzestan (Susa, Tepe Senjar, Haft Tepe), and Central Iran, as well as the oasis regions of Bactria (Tepe Challow), Helmand (Shahr-i-Sokhta) and Halil Rud Basin (Jiroft/Konar Sandal) – as outlined in all the contributions, is coherent in that every region underwent individual development (subsistence, production, cultural and social practices), but also had connections with other regions (trade, intercultural exchanges). There is no doubt that one of the main challenges facing Iranian archaeology would be to redefine the different cultural assemblages, and their chronology, on a regional basis. These connections emerged very early on, at least since the sixth millennium, but gained new momentum during the fourth millennium when fast-expanding cultures (Uruk, Kura) spread extensively into Iran⁸, and from the third millennium onwards, when they were influenced by trade.

For northwest Iran, part of the difficulty in understanding the obvious complexity of the Kura-Araxes culture may be related to the scarcity of excavated and published sites from the fourth millennium BC in the Southern Caucasus as well as in north-western Iran. Furthermore, until recently, little attention was paid to the transition processes between the Chalcolithic period and the Bronze Age in Iran. New excavations and surveys in the Southern Caucasus as well as in north-western Iran provide brand-new supplementary data⁹. Over the past decade, archaeological investigations have clearly shown that

8. Vallet et al. 2017, with references, for new data on the beginning of the (early) Uruk expansion.

9. Chataigner and Palumbi 2014; Marro, Bakhshaliyev and Berthon 2015.

the transition between the Late Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age and the development of the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition is still very badly known. It seems that there is no general explanatory model. The Kura-Araxes culture is now not only evidenced in north-western Iran (Urmia Lake, Kermanshah, Nahavand), but also in northern (Qazvin plain, Mazandaran) and central (Malayer plains, Arak province) Iran. New evidence from the northern part of Iran (Kul Tepe Jolfa) reveals Kura-Araxes ceramics dated to the mid-fourth millennium BC, which is as early as Kura-Araxes evidence in the Southern Caucasus. The Kura-Araxes culture should probably no longer be considered to strictly come from the Southern Caucasus and be strictly exogenous to Iran and the model of migration of foreign Kura-Araxes pastoralists from the North to Iran should be carefully cross-examined. The debate on the “dialectic”/“convergence” between the Uruk and Kura-Araxes “expansions” should be further pursued. Thus, all the new archaeological evidence must be taken into account in future discussions of the transition between the Chalcolithic period and the Bronze Age and the development of proto-urban/urban societies in the western part of Iran.

For northeast Iran, monumental architecture that could be considered as urban with connections to the central power (palatial and/or religious), such as the High Terrace in Tureng Tepe, appears in southern Turkmenistan and southern Afghanistan during the Bronze Age. However, the chronology of this architecture remains uncertain, except for Tureng Tepe, where new absolute dates clearly allocate the monument to the second part of the third millennium/beginning of the second millennium BC. Recent archaeological work in North Khorasan (Tepe Chalow) provides significant perspectives for the discussion on the transition from the Late Chalcolithic to the Bronze Age in this region and the BMAC/Oxus Civilisation/GKC culture origin and expansion during the Middle-Late Bronze Age. Further work in North Khorasan should clarify the chronological and geographical framework of the GKC culture, as well as the specific spatial occupation of the GKC cultural sphere and the shift from rural communities toward urban development in this area. The nature of relations between North Khorasan and the Oxus area and the cultural and regional characteristics should also be investigated in more depth.

For the Khuzestan, Central Iran and Kerman province, three contributions directly address the subtopic of urbanisation (Meyer/Rashidian/Eskandari). While E. Rashidian focuses in particular on the dependence of settlements on water, N. Eskandari introduces parameters that he takes to be preconditions for urbanisation: stratification of the society, work specialization, administrative activities – parameters which, in addition to the extension of the settlement system (cf. Meyer this volume), are also valid for Mesopotamian towns and may even be regarded as global. The participation in long-distance trade and, possibly, the contribution of pastoral and nomadic groups to the construction process of complex urban societies may be regarded as specifically Iranian characteristics.

Indeed, the nomadic component of societies could have been an important parameter for urbanisation. It seems to have had more influence on various aspects of the way of life in Iran than in Mesopotamia, as reflected by the seasonality of residency and the presence of unsettled areas or open spaces inside the settlements. Mobile groups could have played a role in the diffusion of objects (lapis, daggers, vessels) and raw materials (metal, semi-precious stones), as they are the actors of long-distance mobility. Not only northeast Iran (Khorasan), but also the southwest (Kerman) and the Central Plateau (Fars), have connections to Central Asia (BMAC) and the Indus. However, questions surrounding the terms and actors of these connections are still unresolved.

In any case, during the third millennium BC, only Shahr-i-Sokhta, Konar Sandal and Shahdad can be considered to be urban centres, and possibly Tall-i-Malyan in Central Iran, while no clear evidence of urbanisation in Khuzestan emerges during this period, despite the continuity of occupation at Susa. Presumably, clearly visible urbanisation in the Iranian Plateau only sets in during the Old Elamite period (Shimashki in Khuzestan and Fars; ca. 2000 BC). The early towns lack the coherent townscape prevailing in Mesopotamia; instead, in accordance with the local way of life, the urban

space is characterized by extensive open spaces that allow for specific activities (trade, seasonal animal breeding). In fact, even in Mesopotamia, very diverse urban forms have always coexisted¹⁰. The generic or universal model of the disordered Oriental city, in contrast with the planned Greek or Roman city, is a myth created by travellers and classical scholars¹¹, although there are some common features throughout the Near and Middle East, as is the case in European urbanism. It is not only the layout and urban forms that can differ greatly from one region to another, but also the pace and the time-scale of the stages of urbanisation, as is clearly the case between southern Mesopotamia and Susiana. In northern Mesopotamia, Tell Brak reached a proto-urban stage at the beginning of the LC3 period, around 3800-3700 BC, covering perhaps 130 ha around its main tell (40 ha), but remained a hapax in the north for centuries¹². The same can be observed in eastern Anatolia with Arslan Tepe¹³. Except in southern Mesopotamia, the appearance of very few proto-urban centres in the fourth millennium did not indicate the formation of true urban regional networks before the third millennium. The idea that the formation of major centres is automatically linked to wide territorial urbanisation is wrong; the latter phenomenon generally appeared much later. There are at least two main reasons for this: firstly, the proto-urban system was not a simple stage in the urbanisation process, but a lasting system *per se*, and secondly, we must abandon linear evolutionist models in favour of discontinuous regional scenarios¹⁴. All in all, Khuzistan appears much closer to northern than to southern Mesopotamia.

In this respect, Iran is probably an ideal laboratory to study non-linear evolution processes, and there is no doubt that with the help of the much-needed extensive excavations and pluri-disciplinary projects to come, archaeology still has a lot to learn from this unique country.

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10. For a recent overview of the question in Syria, see Castel, Meyer and Quenet (in press) with extensive references; Iraq is less documented due to the lasting political unrest but the situation could change in the coming years; for a general discussion and some case studies see Vallet in press, with references.

11. On this *topos*, Van de Mierop 1999, p. 4-5.

12. See Ur, Karsgaard and Oates 2011; Recent synthesis in Stein 2012, with references.

13. Frangipane 2009; Frangipane 2010.

14. Lovell and Rowan 2010 (for the Chalcolithic in the Near East).

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